

LIBERATING MOTHERHOOD

BIRTHING THE PURPLESTOCKINGS MOVEMENT



Vanessa Olorenshaw

Lucid and riveting... The Female Eunuch of the 21st century.
Steve Biddulph

Praise for Liberating Motherhood

Liberating Motherhood is an important contribution to a vital debate of our times. Vanessa Olorenshaw speaks with warmth, wit and clarity, representing lives and voices unheard for too long.

Shami Chakrabarti, author of *On Liberty*, former director of Liberty and formerly 'the most dangerous woman in Britain'

*Lucid and riveting, this book sweeps you along to a realization that we are at a turning point in history. That even feminism hasn't asked big enough questions. Our humanity depends on re-elevating the nurture of young lives to our most primary purpose. Olorenshaw speaks for a generation of young women who are refusing to have their hearts numbed and their yearnings suffocated for corporate greed and a feedlot existence. This is *The Female Eunuch* of the 21st century.*

Steve Biddulph, international bestselling author of *Raising Boys* and *Raising Babies*

*Through her eloquent way of phrasing modernist questions, Vanessa is propelling herself forward as the symbol of the ultimate phase of the women's liberation movements . . . Read *Liberating Motherhood* from the beginning to the end and you'll appreciate the talent Vanessa has developed in phrasing inevitable new questions.*

Michel Odent, obstetrician and author of *Birth and Breastfeeding*

A fierce and funny new voice — exploding with revolutionary verve. Olorenshaw puts motherhood firmly on the map. Bravo!

Dr Oliver James, Sunday Times bestselling author of *Affluenza*, *They Fk you Up*, and *Not in Your Genes***

Vanessa Olorenshaw's stimulating and timely book gives centre stage to both motherhood itself, and our confusion over it. And not before time . . . Women and men, left and right, should pay attention: mothers truly are our future.

Alison Wolf (Baroness Wolf of Dulwich), author of *The XX Factor*

While feminism has freed many women from domestic subservience, it has inadvertently cast a negative spin on personally delivered parenting. Olorenshaw reminds us that stay-at-home mothering is a damn good way to raise a child. Cogent and well-researched, it provides a much-needed corrective to distorted views of women's liberation.

Dr Shari L. Thurer, author of *The Myths of Motherhood*

Liberating Motherhood is a call to a revolution in thinking by all human beings . . . Olorenshaw is to be heartily congratulated on producing the opening salvo of the campaign to put mothering on the map so that sanity may return to the policy agenda of humanity.

**Dr Frances Hutchinson, author of
*What Everybody Really Wants to Know About Money***

Sharp, uncompromising and witty, Liberating Motherhood relocates maternal experience at the centre of feminist praxis, offering a rallying cry for mothers — and daughters.

Glosswitch, *The New Statesman*

Liberating Motherhood is a breath of fresh air in a culture deadened by the soulless grip of the money machine. Olorenshaw's call to mothers to honor the mysteries of pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and childrearing, brings joy to the heart of this old feminist. Read Liberating Motherhood, pull on your purple stockings and join the revolution.

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky PhD, author of *The Motherline*

Vanessa Olorenshaw's call for a Purplestockings Movement is feminist, long overdue and urgently needed.

Mariam Irene Tazi-Preve, author of *Motherhood in Patriarchy*

An intelligent, well-researched book. It is an essential read for mothers, daughters, fathers, husbands, anyone who has children or is thinking of becoming a parent, and anyone who works with women. Thank you Vanessa for exposing the neglect mothers tolerate and for starting a movement that will create mother-honouring, mother-friendly policies.

Rosjke Hasseldine, author of *The Silent Female Scream*

Liberating Motherhood explores the need for a seismic shift in policymakers' priorities, examining why our systems are failing to secure a better and fairer world for our sons and daughters. Olorenshaw encourages readers to focus their energies on challenging a socio-economic system that is not fit for purpose and which leaves so many families impoverished, marginalised and without a voice. It reminds us that what counts in life can't always be counted.

Marie Peacock, Chair of Mothers at Home Matter

The erosion of respect for women to take care of their children should disturb everyone, not only mothers. Liberating Motherhood explores how the choice and right to work outside the home has to co-exist alongside the choice and right to care for our children. Vanessa tackles the 'mother issue' from the point of view of our bodies, our emotions and our work — but reminds us that love and humanity are a necessary part of the business of motherhood, too.

Laura Dodsworth, photographic artist and author of *Bare Reality*

*Mothering is, perhaps, the most unappreciated and despised work of our time. Vanessa Olorenshaw's *Liberating Motherhood* is a hearty manifesto that tackles this hatred head-on.*

Trista Hendren, author of *The Girl God* series

Vanessa is passionate about putting motherhood in to broader politics, activism and feminism. It's time — for the sake of all women's rights — to take motherhood out of the dusty corners and in to contemporary political and feminist discourse.

Rebecca Schiller, CEO of Birthrights and author of *All That Matters*

Liberating Motherhood is an important and heartfelt analysis of the misogyny underpinning Western culture and our disastrous devaluation of the maternal: read it.

Antonella Gambotto-Burke, author of *Mama: Love, Motherhood and Revolution*

Vanessa's words of alarm are important. They are spoken and thought by every thinking woman from every generation. The time has come to stop history from repeating itself. The time has come for these words to merely call up memories of the past . . . for them to no longer be the present and future realities of motherhood.

Shannon Hayes, author of *Radical Homemakers*

How we raise our children and who will nurture them is one of the biggest issues facing society today. Thank you Vanessa for your contribution to the debate, your book is a real 'cri de coeur'!

Frances Scott, founder and director of 50:50 Parliament

Olorenshaw is immersed in her subject, impassioned but without anger, and oozing compassion and respect for mothers and children alike. Her exploration of maternal feminism is inclusive and compelling. She reveals the vulnerability of tenderly holding family life within an unforgiving economic climate and bothers not to dress up the betrayal of maternal freedoms as anything other. If you want to be reminded of why your mothering is beautifully but strangely revolutionary, read this book.

Michelle Mattesini, Attachment Parenting UK

A witty and forensic discussion of the politics and economics of motherhood. Olorenshaw goes beyond both the religious fetishisation of mothering and the 'feminist' fetishisation of jobs to build a solid case for an economy built around care — for ourselves, each other and the world we live in.

Barb Jacobson, Basic Income UK

This ground-breaking book is essential reading for anyone who cares about women and children. With passion, wit, intelligence, righteous anger and scrupulous research, Vanessa Olorenshaw lays bare not only the truth about how our society is deliberately shaped to require the exploitation of female unpaid caring and domestic labour, but the truth about the power, strength, skill, dedication and joy of mothering too.

Esther Parry, founder of All Mothers Work

*Olorenshaw calls for a reinvigorated feminism that challenges all of us to think bigger — to understand that liberating women, liberating all of us across race, class and gender, requires not just opening opportunities for well-educated women to work in the marketplace, but redesigning that workplace, rethinking outdated policies, and finally honouring and valuing the care traditionally done by women that not only makes work possible in the economic marketplace, but is what ultimately gives work — and life — meaning. There is a better way. And *Liberating Motherhood* outlines a cogent strategy for getting there.*

**Brigid Schulte, author of *The New York Times* bestselling
*Overwhelmed: Work, Love & Play When No One Has the Time***

Liberating Motherhood

BIRTHING THE PURPLESTOCKINGS MOVEMENT



Vanessa Olorenshaw



WOMANCRAFT PUBLISHING

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Womancraft Publishing is committed to sharing powerful new women's voices, through a collaborative publishing process. We are proud to midwife this work, however the story, the experiences and the words are the author's alone.

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Mothers' Voices and the Falling Tree



his book is for my family, most importantly my daughter, my mother, my sister, my nieces and my grandmothers; my son, my husband, my father, my brother and my grandfathers. It is for any woman who is, or wishes to become, a mother.

*Virginia Woolf spoke of *A Room of One's Own*. Well, if not a room, perhaps we all need **something** of one's own. This book is certainly that — it is for myself, past, present and future. If it speaks to you I hope it becomes something for you.*

Maybe this book will make a noise. Perhaps it will echo amongst mothers and beyond — and it's about time. After all, those of us who are mothers at home are like the proverbial tree in the rainforest. When our words fall, if nobody listens, are we really here? Do we make a sound?

*I found that 'invisible' and 'muted' feeling — in the work we do as mothers, in our voices that are kept silent and hidden from the public sphere, destined never to be heard — painful before I started on all this. Not so much now that I know I am not alone in feeling the way I do. We exist. The time for a mother-movement has arrived. It is not just sisterhood, but **motherhood**, which is powerful.*

Thank you for reading. I am very grateful that you are hearing my falling tree.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

I am profoundly and humbly grateful for the help, support and encouragement which my family, friends and fellow mothers have given me in writing this book. I struggled for a long time with my right to write — the vulnerability and the emotional toil took me by surprise. By the time it was written, I started to liken it to a very long pregnancy and a birth with passionate and intense transition, calling for sheer physical and emotional stamina to push it through. Thank you to all those who held my hand while I birthed this book.

My husband showed patience. Thank you. You are an example to your children of what a man can be: affectionate, caring and decent.

My children showed enthusiasm for the idea of ‘Mummy’s book’ while remaining my passion, my motivation and my inspiration; my brother and sister continue to scratch their heads about how I remain a bookworm after all these years; my nieces will read all about neoliberal capitalist patriarchy and be forewarned and forearmed; my dad gets his wedge for the table leg; and my mum now has that love letter — all 300-odd pages of it — from her daughter.

For my mother-in-law: You are something my own father’s mother had been — adored by her son, and loved as a most wonderful grandmother. Thank you for your encouragement in my journey as a mother and in writing this book.

I owe word-midwife and writer Lucy H. Pearce heartfelt thanks, not only for believing in my voice and my book, but for inspiring me through her own book, *The Rainbow Way*, to share my words and harness determination in the face of insecurity and anxiety. Two qualities I now know I share with other writers. Turns out *page* fright is not so uncommon. Thank you, Lucy, for helping me turn my first draft into a book we are both proud of and excited to share with the world. I am beyond grateful to have connected with a publisher with whom I could share my voice and my vision, and to

have *both* heard and embraced. The process, and you, taught me a great deal. Thanks to the team at Womancraft Publishing, and fellow Womancraft authors, who were inspiring and encouraging of my journey, too.

My heartfelt thanks to Naomi Stadlen, who provided such warm support and encouragement in my journey not only as a writer but (earlier, and unknowingly) as a new mother. Naomi, the solace and confidence I found in your words, the recognition of the value of *What Mothers Do* and *How Mothers Love*, will stay with me and generations to come, in my family and countless others. Your words and your message are important and your support of mothers in the work you have done for decades is admirable and inspirational. I am honoured and privileged that you agreed to write a Foreword for my humble book — thank you, and much love.

In campaigning circles, Marie Peacock and Lynne Burnham of Mothers at Home Matter, thank you both so much for everything you do, your tenacity and the tireless work you do for families: without women like you, the political scene would have no heart. The time is now! On a personal note, you have given me such support and shown huge solidarity from before the days of the *The Politics of Mothering* pamphlet through to the publication of this book. I don't think I could have got through some of it without your warm encouragement. Much admiration and gratitude, too, to Heather Ticheli for your tireless work over a number of years to push for the issue of maternal feminism and women's unwaged labour to form the basis of a panel at the Feminism in London Conference. What a wonderful event, and what fabulous women. Thank you Julian Norman and Lisa-Marie Taylor for platforming mothers at the Conference and for organising such an important event on feminism with such inspiring speakers and workshops. Thanks, too, in particular, to Kerry Hedley, Alexandra McVicar, Mel Tibbs, Imogen Thompson, Claire Paye, Karem Roitman, Esther Peacock and all committee members and members of Mothers at Home Matter, for their work and enthusiasm on the campaign. You are all very inspirational women. Alex, I don't think I will forget that evening of feminist 'variety' in a hurry!

To Mother-Sister of All Mothers Work, Esther Parry, thank you for your solidarity and support. I have massive admiration for your infectious passion for the cause. Your voice is an important, inspiring and tenacious one in modern political feminism and I am honoured to have shared a platform with you at Feminism in London Conference.

To all fellow campaigning mothers and members of Mothers at Home

Matter and All Mothers Work, it has been a privilege to spend time with you in person and online. How wonderful that we can create the village we so need as mothers, and as women of words and activism. Thanks, particularly, for encouragement, support, inspiration and more to Denise Sumpter, Teika Bellamy, Tiffany Bray, Barb Sheppard, Melissa Mallows, Hannah North, Erika Edwards Decaster and Carolina-Kawika Allen.

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Thank you Frances Hutchinson for introducing me to the economics of love and *The Machine Stops*, and for your generous support and time in conversation and correspondence. One thing I have felt since starting my campaigning is just how much common ground we can have with other women, including other mothers, despite generational and geographical divides. Your encouragement is much appreciated.

Many thanks to Rosjke Hasseldine. Not only for your time and our wonderful Skype conversations, but for your support, solidarity and encouragement. Your words in *The Silent Female Scream* and in our conversations helped me regain my confidence in my right to write: we all do have the right to speak and to be heard. Your work is valuable and you are inspiring. Thank you.

Thank you to Sophie Walker, leader of the Women's Equality Party, for inviting me to contribute to the policy working group on parenting. This is democracy. We can expect disagreement and we should encourage healthy debate. As is often the case, the strongest dissidents in a party are those who had the highest hopes and I am certainly guilty of the last bit. The motherhood issue was always going to be more challenging and complex than could be adequately dealt with in a matter of a couple of months of policy development. This book fills some significant gaps that were inherent in the process and I remain optimistic that the party will take the issues on board — after all, WEP wants to do things differently. Here's your chance.

Finally, thanks and gratitude variously for encouragement, inspiration, permissions, endorsements, counsel, support, and friendship to: Steve Biddulph, Antonella Gambotto-Burke, Milli Hill, Beverley Beech and the Association for Improvements in Maternity Services, Martha Fineman, Kathleen Lynch, Alison Wolf, Sue Tibballs, Nancy Folbre, Victoria

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Mothers of the world, unite!

#LiberatingMotherhood #Purplestockings

Foreword

by Naomi Stadlen



his book is a call for justice — justice for mothers. It is a call long overdue.

Vanessa Olorenshaw has worked as a lawyer and in legal publishing. When she became a mother and started looking after her two children, she realised that she was doing something important. She found she was contributing to humanity and to our society in a way that she hadn't professionally. Yet our society, she explains in *Liberating Motherhood*, sees mothers who care for their children as 'not working'.

"We could say," she writes, "that a mother's place today is on society's naughty step." With this brilliant image, Vanessa conveys the assumption that many people make: that taking time to be a mother is 'naughty', indulgent and unproductive. Just as children are often ordered to sit on the 'naughty step' without getting a chance to explain their actions to their irate parents, so mothers are frequently judged without being heard. But now mothers have an advocate in Vanessa.

Some feminists might protest: Haven't we fought to liberate mothers from motherhood? Yes, replies Vanessa. She is grateful to earlier feminists and is aware that not every woman wants to be a mother. But she challenges the idea that women's liberation has to mean enabling women to join the culture of paid work. Liberation, she says, can mean freeing ourselves from the wrongs of that culture. "For me," she writes, "mothering my children has been a liberating experience."

The goal of *Liberating Motherhood* is not to liberate every woman *from* motherhood. Rather, it is to liberate every woman who wants to be a mother *for* motherhood. Many mothers want to spend more time with their children but cannot afford to. Vanessa wants us to recognise that it is our *society* that has to change, not mothers. She wants to see mothers supported, and to be given both social respect and better financial options.

Vanessa uses the simple word 'love' (rather than 'bonding' or 'attachment'

— can't we forgo these?) to express how mothers feel for their children. She frequently refers to 'humanity' too. This word describes the best qualities of being human: our awareness of others, our sensitivity to differences, our ability to be compassionate and understanding. And humanity, says Vanessa, is exactly what mothers develop and then bring to society. At present, our society rewards behaviour motivated by selfish values. The humane contribution of mothers, Vanessa keeps reminding us, is much needed today.

Vanessa is determined to see justice done. Hers is a search for fairness. She has practical suggestions too. But her strength lies in her courage. She refuses to remain silent over all the wrongs she has witnessed that are attributed to mothers. Mothers, she contends, are "society's paradoxical scapegoats sat on a pedestal."

If we acknowledge the truth of her words, I don't think we can be bystanders. Vanessa is inviting mothers to join her. She wants to see changes in our society. Mothers need to be heard. And I like her proposal that we wear purple stockings (or tights). We need to be able to recognise one another. There is a good deal to discuss.

In one respect, we need to move forward with caution, and Vanessa agrees with me over this. There is a strange advantage in being disrespected as mothers. Because people are so busy urging us 'back into work', we have been left free to mother our children in our different styles. We may disagree with one another, but we enjoy the precious freedom to differ. Once mothering is recognised as genuine work, isn't it only too likely that someone will draw up a plan to finance us – and then to regulate us?

I marvel at Vanessa for completing *Liberating Motherhood*. She had two children under five years old when she did all the research and wrote it. After long days with them — when most of us would be ready to collapse into sleep — she would stay awake, reading, thinking, making notes and writing.

The result is the book that you hold in your hands. It is a sharp spur to action. "The workplace," says Vanessa, "increasingly encroaches on family life." If we value family life, we need to speak up for it. As individuals, we may be ignored. But collectively, mothers can develop a powerful voice.

Naomi Stadlen is a mother, grandmother and author of *What Mothers Do* and *How Mothers Love*.

Introduction

A MOTHER'S STOCKINGS



A Mother's Stockings

*Women's liberation must be mothers' liberation
or it is nothing.*

Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*

WOMEN'S LIBERATION, MOTHERS' LIBERATION



ater, Mama, Maman, Mutter, Mummy, Mommy, Mother. Me. You. Us.

If it is true that there have been waves within the women's liberation movement, then mothers' rights are the flotsam left behind on the ocean surface of patriarchy. We are currently experiencing a tsunami of 'fourth wave' feminism yet, for mothers who want to care for their young children, little seems to have improved. Many mothers remain alienated from feminism,¹ feeling that it still doesn't speak for us or recognise our lived reality. We see, too, that politics and economics seem to have no place for maternal care. Well, with that in mind, we need to get onto dry land and make the women's movement an earthquake to shake the foundations of our culture to its core. And to get there? I have often reflected that, as women, we can rock the boat but we are not allowed to build a new one. Well, sisters, we really do need a better boat. *The Mother Ship*, to take us to the Motherland. Or something.

We have the right to stand up for ourselves and our families, and we deserve a society which takes on board our rights *as mothers*. Because the reality is that, in all, the right of women to care for our own children on our terms is diminishing, along with any recognition that *care* is valuable and necessary work. When it comes to *maternal* care, we are socially and financially penalised for nurturing our families, despite the fact that care is crucial for the benefit of the human race and society as a whole. Many of us are forced away from our babies and young children against our wishes —

financial pressures leave us little choice but to find paid work to put food on the table and a roof over our heads. Our bonds of motherhood are being replaced with binds to the market and wage slavery. We are in bondage — and not in a 50 Shades way.

When we stop to see where we are now, it is clear that we are witnessing a silencing (bordering on contempt) of mothers who wish to provide loving maternal care to their children: those of us who choose to care are becoming sacrificial lambs at the altar of equality, economics and neoliberal* selfishness. Our sisters who are compelled to be separated from their children against their wishes, who are thereby relieved of the ‘burden’ of care under capitalist patriarchy, have been betrayed. We are supposed to be grateful for this, yet many women are treading water financially or drowning under immense pressure.

As Western women we occupy an interesting time. We have been liberated from the edict that a woman’s place is in the home: it is now *out* of the home. Whether she is a mother or not. Regardless of her own needs and inclinations or those of her children. It is understandable that feminists have traditionally spoken carefully about matters of the womb. After all, a woman’s biology and reproductive powers have been used to keep her down over the course of patriarchal history. The problem is that elements of the women’s movement, in cohorts with neoliberal individualism, have effectively alienated us from motherhood or from caring for our families. Yet women’s liberation never was, nor ever should be, about liberation *from motherhood*: it’s about liberation *from oppression*.

For many women, myself included, becoming a mother and mothering our children can be a liberating and sacred experience. It can *connect* us to something and someone: to love, spirituality, meaning, our children, and our maternal ancestors. It can free us *from* something, it can free us *to* something. There is *something* about motherhood.

From the power of our bodies to create life and give birth, to the nurturing of our children we, as mothers, touch something outside the ‘machine’ of modern economic existence. We know the value in what we do, and it goes far beyond basic economics. But to publicly address such ‘soft’ subjects as maternal care and motherly love is seen as too risky by feminists and politicians in our world where GDP is as God.

* I will explore the meanings and implications of ‘capitalism’ and ‘neoliberalism’ in later chapters and the glossary at the end. For now, think ‘rampant selfishness’ and ‘dog eat dog’. That should do it.

We know that when mothering takes place in conditions which allow us and our children to flourish, it can be one of the most precious times of our lives. Motherhood need not be an institution of inequality or self-sacrifice, if our culture had the will and decency to honour it for what it is: the active continuation and nurture of the future members of the human race. We can celebrate mothering, too, without reducing it to sentimentality or idealisation. We need to speak about the joys, the benefits and the satisfaction in mothering our children, as well as the challenges; and we need society to value what we do and respect us in our work. When mothering is on our terms, it can be a *liberating* motherhood. We know it when we live it, when we feel it and when we see it. It is what we will remember on our deathbed: life, love and little people.

For me, mothering my children has been a liberating experience: I finally saw and understood the power of women. I knew I was doing something important that contributed to humanity and to society in a way that my work in the legal profession hadn't. I know I am not alone in feeling like this. But our society doesn't see it this way. It sees caring for our children as *not* working or, worse, as being somehow parasitic or exercising a privileged choice. Of course, I'm not supposed to say any of this. None of us are. We are supposed to go out to work like good little girls and be grateful for what we've got. Well, that wasn't what got the women's movement rolling — we need to summon up our strength and resist what is happening and demand change. We need to demand the right to frame our lives with autonomy and self-determination.

Many mothers feel immense social and economic pressure to 'get a job' and face financial penalties for caring for their children, or feel the strain of working outside the home on top of everything. We know this from our own experience, our family, our friends, and social media. Mothers in Western culture are effectively forced to return to employment to reduce their financial and personal vulnerability. There were, after all, good reasons for seeking economic autonomy and greater rights in the workforce for women. However, for many women, working our jobs comes at a high cost — the sacrifice of time and the opportunity to care for our own children, and immense domestic pressure at home. Something has to give.

When I talk about *liberating motherhood* then, it is also with a second meaning: how can we ensure that a mother is free of constraints which prevent her from mothering her children? What are these barriers? How can she be free of conditions which render her without economic security

or public standing if she chooses to care for her family? In other words, how can she enjoy both the authority and means to direct her own life, and the respect for her wishes and the choices she makes? How can we make sure that we do not penalise women for making the choice of caring for their families? What could we do to support and empower our sisters who want to care, but are currently compelled to 'get back to work'? How can we make sure mothers have the chance to take time out of the workforce to care for their children, if that is what they want to do, and ensure that they are not penalised when they try to get back to the workplace? Because it needn't be forever. It just has to be for the time that is right for *us*. And the next generation we are raising.

The problem is, for all the talk of women's liberation, when it is predicated on liberation *from* motherhood, it is no liberation at all. When feminism is based on ideas of equality which ignore the actual reality of her life, her deep wish to care for her children, and deny the value of caring, a mother is in chains. We need to get going on liberating *motherhood*. We can say, loud and clear that: "I don't need liberating *from* motherhood: motherhood needs to be liberated from a system which devalues it, devalues us and devalues our children."

So what are the barriers which work against mothers? What do we need liberating from? Well, for starters, despite decades of feminism, Western culture *remains* sexist. I will talk about a little something called 'patriarchy' and a big something else called 'misogyny'. For seconds, we have a cute system called 'capitalism', and its heavyweight contingent called 'neoliberalism'. All these combine so that a mother's price for caring for her family is the sacrifice of full citizenship and financial safety. And the cure under patriarchal neoliberalism? The workplace. Often in low-paid, low-security, low-status jobs. With the second shift² of housework and childcare on top. Which, despite some improvement³, still falls heavier on the shoulders of women. That ain't no liberation, sisters. When it comes to mothers, we have to do better for those of us who *want* to work outside the home, as well as those who would *prefer* to care for their children. It's the least feminism can do: value mothers, the majority of women.

The problem is, despite the average mother's predicament within motherhood, there is no *sisterhood*: the agenda is now driven as much by a privileged class of women as men. They are those women who, instead of trying to dismantle the master's house⁴, moved in and shut the glass door behind them. The power of women to grow babies, birth babies and

nurture them from the breast and beyond is becoming as taboo as the needs of our children to responsive family care, particularly in the early years. The priority is the 'market' and our ambition is supposed to be 'self-sufficiency'. And neither of those honour our wishes, love, our wellbeing, humanity or family life.

The fundamental point is that when it comes to mothers, our culture refuses to honour its responsibility to the very reproducers of the human race. And when we try to order our lives in a way to survive and flourish, we are damned if we do and damned if we don't.⁵ We could say that a mother's place today is on society's naughty step.

Consider the fact that today's mother is expected to be educated, ideally before becoming a mother. But then motherhood is considered a waste of this education. She is expected to give birth naturally, but within a medical situation which tends to interfere with natural childbirth. She is expected to breastfeed, but within a culture still reeling from institutionalised formula milk promotion and loss of skills, expertise and normality of nurturing at the breast and frequent sabotage of her efforts. She is expected to mother her child, but return to work outside the home for long hours. She is expected to be more than a mother, to be a self-fulfilled gender-neutral individual worker-consumer in a capitalist postfeminist world which places the wellbeing of human beings very low indeed. In the midst of this, she is expected to raise healthy, well-adjusted, high-achieving children. If she chooses to care for her children, she is at the mercy and charity of a partner, cast down into the 'private sphere'⁶ in which she is utterly marginalised. Mothers who wish to care for their children are reduced to caricature: the 'stay at home mother', the 'homemaker', the 'housewife',⁷ or just plain 'lazy' and 'unambitious'. We are retrograde, unfashionable, smothering of our children, wasting our talent and 'human capital',⁸ and failing society by 'not contributing'. Welcome to twenty-first century motherhood.

WHERE ARE WE NOW? A MOTHER'S-EYE VIEW

Women have been freed of the expectation of domestic *subservience* by dint of their *sex*. Hurray! Put that feather duster down with pride! Yes, things have changed. A bit. Feminism has achievements to be found here and there: we can now *talk* about sexism as well as *experience* it; we can demand access to careers or jobs yet are also practically *obliged* to check in;

we can talk about pay gaps in the over-forties without creatively finding ways of rebalancing the books or reframing the debate to talk ‘income’ rather than ‘pay’; and we can still argue amongst ourselves about what to do to improve the lives of girls and women around the world. We now know we can be educated alongside men. At least, in Western culture we can. In some regions it can earn a girl a bullet to the head. We know we can enter the professions, but have to fend off sleaze in professional social networks. We have the vote, just no party that represents us. We know we can secure a safe abortion, sometimes, if we are not shot outside Planned Parenthood or living in a Catholic country. We can demand equal pay, and perhaps get it so long as we behave as an unencumbered economic male with no care responsibilities and with limitless enthusiasm for overtime.⁹ But when you become a mother it becomes clear how little freedom you really have. Where once I was a feminist, I am now a Feminist with a capital F, since becoming a mother. It became vivid and real to me just how women are devalued when they dare to connect to their female body and power. If feminism is for the rights of women but does not reflect or fully support the rights of a woman *as* a mother, then it’s letting women down. It is failing to see a huge part of the picture. We are buying tickets for the main show but leaving after the compère. It is not enough to talk work/life balance, childcare, sharing care, flexible working or the pay gap. *Everyday Sexism*¹⁰ is the tip of the iceberg. If our culture remains misogynistic and premised on patriarchal economics, mothers will have to play by the rules they didn’t write and which fail and exploit them. Sisters, our right to care for our children *without sacrificing full citizenship or financial safety* is a right yet to be won.

One could argue that childhood is a recent invention, that parents today invest more time and emotional energy in their children than previous generations, and that our parents and their parents and beyond turned out alright. But we could open our eyes and ears and see a history littered with war, with domestic violence, rape and murder, with neglect and abuse of children, with poverty, with adults with the emotional range of a gnat, with misery and with conflict. We could open our eyes and see patriarchal history, replete with domination and Empire¹¹ and the oppression of women. We could hope for better for our children. Surely that comes with a greater need for humanity, love and care. Without it, our human futures are going to be pretty miserable.

So, sisters, feminism *must* embrace mothers if it is to embrace women.

After all, the old feminist phrase got it only half right: the personal is indeed political. *But so is the maternal*. It sometimes seems that “at the place where feminism and motherhood intersect the fires still burn”.¹² Yet, the rights and needs of mothers are a necessary and central force in feminism, if feminism is going to serve women and our humanity and lead to necessary and fundamental social and economic change. It is time for a progressive new movement of women: an energised, humanist, maternal feminism. One which puts humanity at the heart, and remembers to call mum — because, for years, feminists have fought to free women *from* motherhood . . . but we are still having to fight to free motherhood itself. For the benefit of mothers *and* society as a whole. Because we are all born to a mother: every human being was grown inside a mother’s body.¹³ It is a universal shared experience within our humanity. As Patrice DiQuinzio writes, “being a mother and being mothered are both imbued with tremendous social, cultural, political, economic, psychological, and personal significance”.¹⁴

The problem in the twenty-first century is that our perspective as a class — women — has fundamentally changed. We are unaffected by maternity for longer than our ancestors ever were. So by the time the *mother* problem becomes *our* problem, we’re so mired in it that any action we can agitate for is too little, too late. For us. The average age for first-time mothers in the West is increasing. It is now into our thirties. What does that mean, in reality? It means feminism is becoming *remote* from mothering. Becoming a mother later in life brings with it a greater sense of shell shock: we have lived a large proportion of our lives as autonomous, relatively carefree, adults of a ‘post-domestic’ age. We taste economic autonomy, we live equality. Then a baby comes and screws it all up.

We have had, what, thirty-plus years of child-free feminism to live and preach. No room for nappies. No room for thinking about ‘non-economic’ contributions to society. No room for remembering that while a woman can do anything a man can do, there are three big things a woman can do that a man can’t: create life, give birth, and breastfeed. We need to proclaim that power rather than be ashamed. We have internalised the message that we do not matter and that these things are inconsequential, or make us weaker, or are things to be ‘offed’. We live identity not bodily reality; our experiences may well be ethereally gender-neutral until a human being makes his way down our vagina and attaches to our breast, covering us in amniotic fluid and connecting us with the life-creating and birthing process of generations of women before us. We have sneered at work (breastfeeding) when it is

something only a woman can do, disqualifying it from the very definition of ‘work’ (tell that to those of us who are doing it 24/7 for months on end), seeing formula milk as liberation. We devalue work (child-rearing) when it is work traditionally done by women. We have failed to protect and support mothers or value women’s life-creating power and life-sustaining work. Sisters, we must demand greater support and flexibility for that — not simply the liberation *from* it.

As Daphne de Marneffe observes, “every woman’s feminism is a love letter to her mother.”¹⁵ Indeed, in modern feminism, ‘mothers’ feature (especially for the younger and child-free variety) often only in relation to our *own* mother, to be dreaded, hated, adored or feared. Those who are not mothers, or not yet mothers, do not need to address their minds to what it means, and what the variety of needs might be for those women who *have* children. There is a lack of solidarity, of common ground and respect, within feminism in the twenty-first century. So, the sister lives the dream, albeit within a sexist society which pretends the feminist fight is won. She fights the battle on the feminist front but leaves mothers in the trenches. Because the thing is, she is not, contrary to her noble ideals, Everywoman. She is not her sister, her cousin, her mother. Women are diverse: the concerns of women vary according to our experience, our class, our race, and more. Her concerns and activism can never speak for all women. Add race, sex, sexuality, disability and education and other factors to the mix and you have an intersectional¹⁶ soup of needs, desires and struggles. And the most infuriating part of it is that it is usually only the Feminist the Younger, or Dissatisfied-with-Mothering-Woman or Capitalist-Woman or Journalist-cum-Politician who is heard, lauded, respected, published, elected and heeded.

The reality is that many women dream of a life where they could be free from the chains of bondage to the workplace, even for a short time, and retain standing and economic security. Many women who are well-educated and working in the professions might well, at one point, sit down and think, “That’s it, I’ve had it, there is more to life than this”. Traditional feminist thought implies that women are put down and kept down by reason of patriarchy and their sex. As much as I agree with that one, its brother, capitalism, has its fingers in mum’s apple pie and is the Iago in the ear of feminist politics. And it whispers “work till you drop”.

Yes, it is an uncomfortable fact for many, inconvenient but nevertheless true, that women can, and do, bear and breastfeed children. As many

families will know, sometimes — if not often — only mummy will do. Like I said, inconvenient. But ask a hundred mothers who their baby cries for, who their toddler cries for, who their preschooler cries for. Even a grown man dying on the battle field whispers, in his last breath, for “mother”. We lived in her. She is not insignificant. This is not to say that sex is destiny. Feminism has been there, and done that. But somewhere along the line, the rightful protest that we are *more* than mothers and more than our wombs has led to a failure to remember that we are, still, *mothers*. We can dissect ‘sociological this’, and rebut ‘anthropological that’, but as human beings we have evolved, and I want to believe that we have evolved for decency, responsibility, joy and love. Mothers remain an important part of that outlook, and it has to have a feminist lens. Maternal feminism¹⁷ in purple stockings, reminding the world to remember the need for love and humanity, and which places mothers at the heart, rather than in the margins.*

The political and economic system must start to reflect this reality and the reality of what many, *many* women want: to have their work as mothers respected, valued and supported. For their return to employment to be of a time of their genuine choosing, rather than compulsion. We have a long lifespan. With that in mind, we can do better than forced workforce participation for our *entire* adult lives. For the set-up of a mother’s employment to be based on her wishes and her family’s needs, including flexible or home-working and greater opportunities for fathers to work flexibly and take dependency leave. For a mother’s choice (if that is what she decides) to shun employment but to run the home and care for the children instead, to be supported and for socio-economic policies finally to cut mother-women some slack.

We talk about choice. We look at careers. We look at education. We look at employment rights. We look at maternity and paternity rights. We encourage the separation of mothers from their babies, toddler and preschool children. We deride women who stay at home when their children are at school. The only choice we are supposed to make is: combine motherhood with employment *outside* of the home. There is no other

* ‘Maternal feminism’ in this context is *not* the socially conservative kind advocated in the eighteenth century, related to the ‘cult of domesticity’, or discussed by, say, Christina Hoff Sommers in *Freedom Feminism*. It is *not* about celebrating inherent feminine qualities, patriarchal family and capitalist society. It is a bit more radical than that.

way. No other framework within which to protect mothers' interests (for example, state stipends, a carer's income, universal basic income, readjusted pay on return to the workforce to allow for the time out, funding for retraining, investment in community projects and services for the family at home) is tolerated or explored. Choice? What choice?

MY JOURNEY

I was a woman: a professional. Then I became a mother. And things changed. I found myself *needing* to communicate with other mothers about what is going on in our culture. I couldn't be the only one, surely, who winced every time mothers at home mentioned that they 'didn't work'. The implication being that we are doing nothing. We know this is unfair and untrue: I know it now and I knew it when I hadn't slept for more than a two-hour stretch, had kept a baby alive and growing on my milk alone, whilst managing to keep a toddler happy, fed and safe, preparing three meals a day, and two loads of laundry before every other thing I had done. I knew I couldn't be alone in wondering why the work of mothers is seen as a lifestyle choice equivalent to keeping poodles.¹⁸

I started my activist and writing career in the snatched moments between a toddler at the breast, tantrum calming, sibling negotiations, moment-to-moment care, reading, phonics, baking, loving, with a particular agenda: to discuss, in a professional manner, *The Politics of Mothering*.¹⁹ That was the name of the 2015 political pamphlet I wrote, taken from a chapter of a first draft of this book. It was well-researched yet careful. In it I was to remain cautious, fearful of appearing judgemental, worried about offending anyone, and astute to use acceptable English prose at all times. After all, I had been schooled in the law, tutored in decorum and raised as a female — to know my place.

However, humble and polite requests only get you so far. I researched the issues, talked to varied groups of activists, campaigners, feminists, academics, psychotherapists, volunteers, writers and mothers and realised that I needed my book to speak to *mothers* first and foremost. Because, at times, we can feel like we are on the sidelines, listening to political discussion *about* our lives and shaking our heads because it simply doesn't speak for *us*. I had to lay it on the line: I couldn't face this becoming a book gingerly tiptoeing around the issue, apologising for the message out of fear

of causing offence. Women do enough of that, already.

As I wrote this book, I found myself blogging, writing, speaking at the Feminism in London Conference and the “Caring, Survival and Justice v The Tyranny of the Market”, International Women’s Conference in 2015. In between, I became involved with the Women’s Equality Party UK (WEP) as a founding member. I contributed to a policy working group in which I headed a sub-team of myself, Global Women’s Strike and Mothers at Home Matter. We advocated on behalf of the many women who would like to see greater recognition and support for their desire to look after their children. We needn’t have bothered. Instead it demonstrated through its policy launch that it was the Women Employee’s Equality Party (and did I WEEP). “Some women are more equal than mothers” might have been an accurate strapline.

So when I talk of mothers at home (or mothers who want to be) being *personae non grata*, I can tell you that I experienced that feeling first-hand in my subsequent dealings with the party: I had had the *cheek* to talk about the economic vulnerability of mothers who want to care for their children and about the injustice facing women who were deprived of the opportunity to. I had spoken heresy in the house of capitalist equality.

This demonstrated to me just how urgent the need *is* for a radical shift in the way in which motherhood, child-rearing and family life are viewed in Western culture and how, as a result, they are treated socially and economically. It requires fundamental change. Because what will the world be like without motherhood? We are starting to see already . . . Our culture is separating the reproductive function of *mother* from the caring, nurturing aspect of *mothering*, which the state insists can be performed more *efficiently* and *expertly* by paid carers thus adding to GDP by paid services to childcare-workers. It frees up the ‘wasted labour’ of well-educated mothers as well as the ‘cheap labour’ of less educated women. Call me cynical. Turns out rebellion now resides where my placentas had once been.

#NOTALLWOMEN #NOTALLMOTHERS

It’s important we get a few things clear, before we continue.

First off: not all women need be mothers. Not all mothers need care for their children either full or part-time. Not all mothers should be forced out to work in the labour force. No two mothers are the same. Some will

relate to what I write, others will not. While I speak of mothers as a class, I do not suggest that mothers are some kind of homogenous mass with identical needs, values, ambitions, personality or talents. That is, actually, my very point: a feminism and a politics which assume we are all itching to delegate care of our children fails us. Nor do I mean any offence or insult to women who, for whatever reason, cannot have children. We know that many women feel a loss for not being able to have children. We can and must support, empathise with, and respect them in their own journey. Consideration and respect must go, too, to those women who choose not to have children: they are not lesser women — although they may be rebels against patriarchy and as such have received some almighty flack over the years. They are entitled to respect and understanding for their decision. Although only women bear children, it does not follow that only *real* women bear children. #WomenOfTheWorldUnite

Such subversive ideas! My goodness, it's almost as though I have just said that women should be respected in their *diversity*! A woman's place must be wherever she wants to be, and where it suits her and her family. Not just the capitalist state. And not just patriarchal heteronormative* standards (you know, that world view that promotes heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation). After all, many women become mothers before or within same-sex partnerships, or become a lone parent out of choice or compulsion. A fundamental part of a humane feminism and society is that women's choices, loves, lives and personal relationships are a matter for her, and her alone. She should be entitled to respect and support, no matter the set-up, her sexuality, her marriage status, her class, her colour and more besides. We have to shed ideas about 'deviant mothers' and recognise that a woman must be empowered to mother without a man, if that is her wish and her choice, or *not* to be a mother at all. A 'conservative family values' approach to children and mothers is not what this is about. It is about a motherhood in which we are free from stereotype and discrimination. It is about valuing care and valuing mothers: we needn't have chains to a man to be deserving of this fundamental right.

Second: yes, yes, being a mother does not *define* us. But it's the elephant in the birthing suite. We cannot ignore it any longer. The treatment of mothers politically is predicated on *continuous* workplace participation²⁰ to the detriment of many women, children and their families. A mother

* If this term is new to you, you will find a short definition in the glossary. Just think: Me Tarzan, You Jane, as the law of the jungle.

who wants to stay home with her babies and toddlers might well want to share the care down the line, to reflect the differing needs of the children at different stages of their development. Yet there is no recognition of this in public policy and economics or in society at large. Many would wish to have a chance of exercising *choice* about how to set up family life. If family life and the work of care and nurture were to be valued, elevated and respected (as well as funded, for the job is an important one which somebody's got to do) then we would be on our way to a fairer society, a more feminist society and one which stops worshipping the dollar as though we can take it with us.

Third: mother does not equal victim. There are many, many, families that, during a particular stage of life, would like the mother to take time out of the workforce to care for her children. This is not the same as saying she is, or should be, destined to 'domesticity' or 'housewifery' for the rest of her life. Women tend not to have a baby every two years for fifteen years, nowadays. Thanks to feminism, we have moved beyond the bogus love affair with the twin tub and twin sets. It is simply recognising that, at a particular time in her life's journey, she is on a different track (not the mommy track²¹), doing caring family work instead of employed or professional work.

At heart, the reproductive effect on the division of labour and discrimination against women in the workplace has little, in reality, to do with the *few* years a mother might want to take out of the labour force. It is about misogyny and sexism against women; it is about the refusal of the economic system to reform the workplace to recognise that women and men have lives and family outside of the workplace; and it is as much to do with our refusal to value the work a mother has done and the skills she can bring back with her when she does. It is centrally about our workplaces failing to honour the family responsibilities of mothers and fathers. It is about "the maternal wall"²²: the penalties mothers who want to do market-work face by reason of the care which it is presumed falls to *them*.

Fourth: who do I mean by mothers? There are extensive nuances in feminist debate when it comes to motherhood, birth and reproductive creation. I nod to the intense emotions which can arise in this field (and if we think they are intense in this chapter, wait till we start talking *lactation*). Some women do not give birth at all, out of choice, frustration or inability. My focus, for example, on biological mothers in some chapters does not suggest that an adoptive mother is not a mother, or is less of a mother.

Whilst I speak of birth, I do not neglect the fact that one can become a mother by adoption. By choosing to love a child, to mother that person, and to raise that being as their own flesh and blood. To become a mother is such a precious thing that the very fact that women desperately seek to become one (whether biologically or adoptively) is testament to its importance. Its status. Its worth. To choose to become a mother to a child already born takes commitment. Nothing I say in this book takes away from the bond an adoptive mother has with her children.

Fifth: just as not all mothers are primary carers of their children, not all carers are women and not all carers are mothers. I recognise this at the outset because it is important for our culture and socio-economic systems to start to value *care* and *carers*. This is so whether the carers are men or women, whether parents or paid professionals, or other relatives, such as grandparents or even children. Indeed, in the UK, there is a significant number of children who care for their parents or siblings. It is important. When I argue for valuing care it is with *all* carers — of the young, the sick, the disabled, the elderly, and the dying — in mind. That said, I write from a mother's perspective and as a mother, to add to the wider debate about care and the need for feminism to recognise that many mothers want to care for their children for the time and balance of their choosing.

During the writing of this book I corresponded with academic and economist Nancy Folbre, whom I much admire. She told me that she focuses on *care*, not on mothering, “because I think care is a bigger, broader, more inclusive issue. Also, my experience in the US (which is a very different political and cultural environment than the UK) is that many men who are active fathers or elder caregivers feel like a ‘mother mother mother’ emphasis reinforces traditional gender roles. Adding an occasional sentence or phrase acknowledging men doesn't necessarily solve this problem”. I understand and respect Folbre's perspective. I would like to see the work of more men in this area, to champion the need for care, such as the Payday Men's Network in the US, with a view to collaboration and partnership for the need to value care. I agree, as a feminist, that we have to challenge gender stereotypes and expectations, including embracing the fact that many fathers do and want to provide loving, responsive care. However, as Folbre knows, I personally focus on mothers. I do so because it is increasingly rare for mothers to feel able or entitled to speak our name. With that comes increasing difficulty in advocating for our rights and needs. That is a feminist issue: the naming of women; the naming of mothers.

Sixth: Women are often policed in our views or our language. It is a traditional and effective way to silence women. So I say at the outset that I make no apology for framing the book and terminology in the way I do, from the issues of love and care, to feminism and patriarchy, and from capitalism to social justice. To the issue of mothers and children, many people bring their own insecurities. Yet you will neither find judgement of other mothers nor suggestions that to be a 'good mother' requires being a primary carer. You will find no suggestion that mothers who do not care *for* their children full-time, doing the care-work, do not care *about* them. There is physical care-work; and then there is emotional labour and caring about our families. The sensitivities of those who might take umbrage at the cheek of a woman daring to talk about maternal care do rather demonstrate my point that mothers face significant barriers before them in seeking to discuss or promote their rights and needs.

And, finally, I speak about mothers and our reproductive bodies because the majority of the female population will become mothers at some point in their lives. It is not insignificant. I am speaking for and to women who want to care for their children or who cannot do so because their role as mother and the work of care are insufficiently valued. They may even fear to speak about their female bodies, given that talking about biology can be surprisingly contentious in the era of identity politics. What I see is that many women who are mothers are not being heard or respected. And so *I* focus on them. In sisterhood. In *motherhood*.

So on every count: #NotAllWomen #NotAllMothers. Let's march onwards, shall we? #Purplestockings

FEMINISM 101

Just as we mustn't fear talking about our needs* as women, and mothers, we needn't fear talking about feminism. We are women. We are mothers. We might well have daughters. Just think about the wisdom of Maya Angelou when she said, "I've been a female for a long time now. It'd be stupid not to be on my own side."

Feminism is not dead (rumours of its demise are always exaggerated). So before I go on, perhaps a short iteration of what feminism is and what it is not. One of the biggest challenges is the fact that so few people seem to agree about what feminism *means*, what it is seeking to achieve, and what it must do.

First things first, feminism is certainly *not* a system or a theory which wants to see the obliteration or oppression of men. Rather it illuminates the fact that our 'history' is a censored, photoshopped, patriarchal history of 'Man'. The reality is that women have to live, work and love within a culture and under the rules of the Father, the Son, the Husband, the Male, the worship of the masculine, and the prioritising of destruction over creation of life.²³ Hey, nobody said this was going to be about unicorns. To quote Andrea Dworkin, "I'm a feminist, not the fun kind."²⁴

Feminism is about a quaint notion: that women are people too. And with that understanding, that women should have basic human rights, the right to autonomy and self-determination, freedom from inhumane treatment, oppression, gender stereotype, and all the rest. The thing is, much of the human rights message has been lost in translation. Equality became the buzzword: which is interpreted by many to mean 'the same'.²⁵ Equality is, in truth, a massive red herring. The overwhelming preoccupation with 'equality', to quote academic Eva Feder Kittay, "misses the importance of the symmetries and differences that are unavoidable and even desirable in human intercourse".²⁶ The debate about 'special treatment' has been raging for long enough. Time for some *humane* treatment: the recognition of a diversity of needs and the acknowledgement of discrimination and exploitation of women by virtue of their becoming mothers. The

* Although I speak directly to mothers throughout the book, don't worry, you have a place here, reading these pages, even if you are a man or not a mother. Just see it as a virtual eavesdropping of a subversive mothers' meeting. You would want to know what is being said, wouldn't you? What is being *exposed*? The mother issue and the Purplestockings Movement affects *you* as well. Really. It does.

standpoint²⁷ of mothers cannot be minimalised in feminism any longer. We are a beating heart. We are strong arms. And we need to march our way into politics, feminism and economics. We need to *demand* that the persistent and institutional discrimination against mothers is exposed and levelled with creativity and humanity.

There are numerous 'schools' of feminism²⁸, and tensions between them, ranging from liberal, Marxist, socialist and radical. We also have a de facto corporate feminism which is predicated on 'more women at the top'.²⁹ Come on now! That ain't feminism: it is capitalism. And under it, there will always be women at the bottom. Then there is a feminism which is clear that what is between our legs is irrelevant — it's how we *identify* that matters.³⁰ Clearly, feminism has many shades.³¹

Personally, I agree with Rebecca West's sentiment in 1913 that "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat . . ." And a doormat I ain't. The rights and challenges of women are central to my feminism. I will also address the needs of children. I am very clear that mothers are important to their children, and that our children — our flesh and blood — are important to *us*. If a feminist mother cannot say this, we are in trouble, aren't we?

However, when it comes to mothers, some schools of feminism seem to evoke *My Fair Lady* and Professor Higgins' lament "why can't a woman be more like a man?"³² sung to a minor melody of "Capitalist Patriarchal Neoliberalism". I will discuss this poxy trinity, and the meanings of its components throughout the book, but for the time being 'money, men and selfishness' will probably give a good enough idea of what these mean.

Feminism was the movement that was supposed to free us from patriarchy and lead us to the promised land — not necessarily *Herland*,³³ but one where we could enjoy human rights, equality of opportunity and dignity. But somewhere along the way it got lost and confused. It has become seen as, and is, for some women: "I want what men have".³⁴ In reaching for that, we have lost touch with what *women* have (or could have). The baby has been thrown out with the feminist bathwater and, in doing so, some women have indeed got what men have: power over other women.

If we struggle to speak of the issues that remain for all women under patriarchy, we are even more bound when we try to articulate the mother issue. There is an awkwardness about women's reproductive and mothering experience. They are seen as more private and personal. In her work, Jean

Bethke Elshtain explored issues surrounding the ‘private sphere’: why do we devalue the ‘private’ over the ‘public’? Why is a ‘public’ role effectively seen as more worthy and a marker of citizenship than private, family or community work? Why do we continue to deny broad differences in the lived experience of men and women? To quote Elshtain, “To recognize that women as a group experience their social worlds differently from men as a group complicates feminist thinking, deepens female self-awareness, and calls attention to the complexity and richness of our social experience and relations”.³⁵ There is an unspoken rule that one may not engage in biological essentialism* or exploration of difference. In *Motherhood in Patriarchy, Animosity Toward Mothers in Politics and Feminist Theory — Proposals for Change*, Mariam Irene Tazi-Preve calls this the “taboo of physicality”.³⁶ As Patrice DiQuinzio frames it, “the dilemma of difference and its resulting paradoxes are most salient and most difficult to resolve at the site of mothering”.³⁷ She talks of the “problem of maternal embodiment”.³⁸ Mothers are the square peg in the round hole. A reminder that individualism has its limits and that denial of difference fails to reflect substantial issues relating to mothers and motherhood.

When it comes to politics, socialist feminism has become somehow old-fashioned, talking as it does of redistribution of wealth, capital and accumulation, when nobody talks like that any more. In fact, some feminists resemble the pigs in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: it is hard to tell them apart from the patriarchal capitalist farmer.³⁹ And in our farm, some women are more equal than others. Indeed, as I have said, some women are more equal than *mothers*. Two legs (individualism) good — four legs (mum’s two and little un’s two), bad. The “occupational elite”⁴⁰ — those who, quite frankly, seem to live in a different world, immune to the issues facing many families today — are wilfully blind to the everyday existence of women outside their domain.

Our modern feminist and political dialogues obscure the desires and needs of the majority of mothers: those unimportant ones reproducing the human race and raising them to be decent future citizens. This tension leads many women on the ground to think that feminism is irrelevant

* See the glossary for further definition. For now, biological essentialism is about bodies. Feminism has traditionally argued that women are more than what is between our legs. Under some schools of feminism today, what is between our legs is irrelevant. Somehow, the point in between, namely, we are bodies, minds *and* worthwhile human beings all at the same time has been missed.

to their lives or their struggles. As Ann Crittenden writes in *The Price of Motherhood*, “changing the status of mothers, by gaining real recognition for their work, is the great unfinished business of the women’s movement”.⁴¹ Well, sisters, time to finish the job. Time for a movement in our language: The Mother Tongue.

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

So what on earth is this ‘Purplestockings’ business? Well, you may have heard of the terms ‘Bluestockings’ to describe a collection of educated, intellectual, women in the eighteenth century; or ‘Redstockings’ to describe women’s liberationists.⁴² In the tradition of those sisters, I decided on ‘Purplestockings’ to signify a maternal feminism, as a nod to the Suffragette colours, to invoke the nobility of mothering, and because it aptly combines the hue of its two predecessors. We have to know our history as well as what we want in the future: the stockings movement has a worthy heritage to take us forward.

As former director of Liberty, Shami Chakrabarti, said at the Feminism in London Conference in 2015, sometimes it’s worth remembering that Martin Luther King didn’t say, “I had a nightmare”. We must allow ourselves some measure of hope and optimism. We can imagine “better worlds”.⁴³ We can have a dream. And mine is one in which our children enjoy fruitful and decent humanity, where mutual love and care abound, responsible society and ethical behaviour are the norm. Mothers can be respected for the work they do as mothers, *as well as* any work they do outside the home. Whether in combination or in a sequence. I can dream, can’t I? It’s not going to happen, is it? Well, if we had the will, it could . . . and it should. So rather than give up before we’ve begun, shouldn’t we try to do something about it?

When it comes to women and mothers, we can do something *now*. Our task, and something which must urgently enter into feminist consciousness, is the attempt to balance and bring justice to the scales of judgement against mothers, to support mothers in the important work they do and to ensure that isolation, poverty and other struggles faced by mothers are alleviated. It is an injustice, cleverly camouflaged, that the work of mothers can be sabotaged by society or blighted by hurdles they face financially and socially, and yet mothers get the blame. It’s a con trick. And women are sick of being the mark.

The problem is, when it comes to mainstream feminism and politics, there has been an abject lack of “nerve and imagination”⁴⁴ to push for equitable social and workplace conditions or labour and income redistribution. We rightly address the injustices of women losing their jobs or suffering discrimination in their jobs or career during pregnancy or after becoming a mother, but we forget those who want to step out of the workforce to be with their family. We talk about equality, but we forget fairness: equity. We talk about pay gaps, but we no longer talk about “redistribution of wealth”. We talk about full employment, without reimagining labour rules and workplace structures which respect family life for mothers, fathers and children. Instead of liberation, we have witnessed strands of feminism becoming footsoldiers of capitalism⁴⁵ — itself patriarchy’s recent incarnation.⁴⁶

The problem is, there is no escaping the cold hard reality that, throughout the world, girls and women are at risk of being, or have been, emotionally, physically and/or sexually abused. By men. For me, there is no forgetting some of the horrific cases I saw during criminal practice and, later, as a law reporter. They were the proof I wish I had never seen that we indubitably live in a misogynistic culture.

This is the context in which a mother seeks to raise her family.⁴⁷ This is the context in which a mother seeks to improve her conditions of life, mothering and work, and her status and safety. And that of her children. This is the context that a mother has to stride. This is the context in which she does something explicitly and necessarily female (pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding) or something traditionally connected to women. She is mothering in the midst of *misogyny*: within a culture that dislikes and distrusts women. To quote the RadFem Collective, “our oppression as females is closely linked to and bound up in our roles as the bearers of new life and male hatred of our female reproductive power”.⁴⁸ It is all connected: motherhood and feminism cannot and should not be separated.

The reality is that we cannot expect feminism to succeed until we embrace all women. And that includes mothers. We cannot treat women as being of value and worthy of respect only where they disavow or sideline matters of motherhood. We cannot exile mothering from feminism. We need a triad of human rights, women’s rights and mother’s rights within a prism of social responsibility.

Just so you know, this ain’t no backlash.⁴⁹ There were never any good ol’ days: feminism hasn’t “gone too far”. Actually, it didn’t go far *enough*.

Patriarchy has had its *own* triad of capitalism, technology and male domination⁵⁰ for far too long. And within it, there is still little room for women, for mothers, certainly not a room of their *own*.⁵¹ We need to start thinking about politics, economics and social policy, despite a potential knee-jerk reaction to groan. We have to connect to those fleshy things: our bodies. And those dangerous things: our minds. We need to take in issues of “sameness and difference”; the place of motherhood and whether we all want women’s responsibility for children to be turned over to delegated childcare, or shared care with men; whether caring for children is part of a significant number of women’s actual desire, rather than a social construction or result of conditioning; how to “create a society in which caregiving is not penalised”; and the diversity amongst women.⁵² We need to retain that crucial thing: our heart.

This is before we even *begin* to factor in race and class struggle: factors which can bring profound difficulties and raise significant barriers for women.⁵³ As a woman of working-class upbringing, I heard both my grandmothers’ stories of cleaning people’s houses, working to the bone, working in factories and other things which it is not my place to share. I saw my mother struggle with three children, a full-time job and the second shift on top. Consequently, I have long questioned just *how far* the frustrations of a privileged class of white middle-class educated women can legitimately speak for those women whose struggles in respect of class, race and disability bring a different slant to the issue of motherhood. Their experiences of mothering may well be completely different in terms of social support, satisfaction, and prestige.⁵⁴ Betty Friedan’s frustrated, isolated housewives, whom she depicted in *The Feminine Mystique*, for example, were not those women of colour who had strong support networks from female relatives but who were exploited in market-labour of low status and low pay, or Asian women who retained the culture of close extended family, or working-class women who lived in built-up areas with thriving solidarity amongst women in their terraced houses and low fences but who did double shifts of factory *and* home. *Their* struggles were rarely articulated in the movement, so preoccupied with the assumptions that white privileged feminism spoke for all, and that oppression under patriarchy was the principal source of oppression for *all* women. In terms then of priorities for the women’s movement, opportunity, education and the freedom to flourish in the public realm, the arts, the professions and industry, are important. They are crucial aspects of women’s liberation and

empowerment. But *compelled* employment, low-status and low-paid jobs and zero-hour contracts versus impoverishment for unwaged work? No. We need to restructure the workplace and market-work on the one hand and the freedom to care, without penalty, on the other. We need the 'private realm' to be liberated from being somehow 'second class'.

Within the dominant ideology of twenty-first century Western cultures, it often feels that no one is actually listening to what mothers would prefer. Certainly not our politicians and policymakers anyway. There are clear (and fairly persistent) divisions amongst women as to what they would prefer: some would like to work full-time; others part-time; others to care exclusively for their families.⁵⁵ We all have different personalities and inclinations, after all. Yet, when politicians *do* hear women's preferences, they have a terrible habit of reformulating the answers to meet their own agenda and suggesting that we all want to combine market-work with care-work or to work full-time.⁵⁶ So it is that we face insidious ideological attempts at social engineering and a failure to reflect our true choices. The reality is stark: mothers — as a class — are, in gradual steps, losing the rights, freedom and economic ability to raise their own children, within the patriarchal and capitalist project.

If current trends in social and economic policy are anything to go by, there will be greater and greater barriers against our ability to care for our own families. And conditions may well become so intolerable owing to lack of money, security, support, respect, freedom and autonomy (or exhausting second shifts) that we, and the next generations of mothers, will struggle; but the blame will be placed on *motherhood*. Not politics. Not economics. Not patriarchy. Not neoliberal pathological market-driven environmental and social destruction. Not misguided attempts by some feminist camps to eradicate mothering. But *becoming a mother*. And that script is being written right now with the sanction of women, female politicians, and of course, patriarchal neoliberalism. We may not speak our own line: that being a mother by desire is, for many women, one of the most precious experiences of our lives.

When it comes to the popular script that we need liberating from care and children, it comes down to 'she who shouts loudest wins prizes'. It is no stretch of the imagination to see a link between the occupation of the public arena, fought for and won by women as a result of feminism, and the accompanying privilege of having a voice that is heard and respected. However, just because a voice grabs the mic doesn't mean that it is either

right or in the majority: a woman at home raising her family, happily or not, will not have her voice heard. Democracy, eh? She will be conveniently ignored, her silent scream about the lack of recognition of her work will ring in her ears alone.⁵⁷ Social media can only go so far: yes, we can blog, we can chat on Facebook. We can even meet other like-minded mothers in real life at baby and toddler groups. But ultimately, there has to be a political, visible, active, in-yer-face movement. We need to move beyond a 'feminism of uncertainty'.⁵⁸

I am not alone in my calls for the feminist movement to embrace this issue of mothers. In writing this book, I corresponded with many women who are writing, speaking and raising consciousness on this topic. One was academic Martha Fineman, the author of *The Neutered Mother: The Sexual Family and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies*. We discussed the tireless work which feminist academics have been doing for decades on the subject of women, care, the family and the sexual division of labour. I will be referring to this and other insightful work in this field that has been pushing the issue of motherhood and care into public debate, and which provide some extremely important and necessary perspectives on the issue. If you are looking for further primers on motherhood and feminism, you could start with *Maternal Theory*, edited by Andrea O'Reilly of Demeter Press and the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement.⁵⁹ During the final stages of production of *Liberating Motherhood*, I caught an announcement (and I cheered!) from Demeter Press about a forthcoming book, *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, Practice*, from Andrea O'Reilly. Although academic in tone, I'd say the book's message is likely to be in the Purplestockings tradition. O'Reilly "argues that the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman and that many of the problems mothers face — socially, economically, politically, culturally, and psychologically — are specific to women's work and identity as mothers. Indeed, mothers, arguably more so than women in general, remain disempowered despite forty years of feminism. Mothers, thus, need a feminism of their own, one that positions mothers' concerns as the starting point for a theory and politic of empowerment". Yup. That'll do it. O'Reilly calls this "matricentric feminism".⁶⁰ Maternal feminism. Matricentric feminism. Mother-centric feminism. Justice and fairness for mothers. We are women and we are mothers. How can we tolerate our culture, feminism and socio-economic policy continuing to deny and neglect a core part of our identity, a huge range of our needs and the importance of what we do?

The more voices we raise the better, and we need our sisters to join us: it's our lives and the lives of our children. What can be more important than that? There is a wealth of skilful research, theory and analysis out there. Do read it. And add your voice.

Because it matters. Not just to us as individual women, but to our culture, our species and the quality of human existence.

Carl Gustav Jung, the father of analytical psychology, famously talked about the “unlived life” of parents. Whatever one's view of Jung's attitudes towards mothers (about right, questionable, blaming or pernicious, say⁶¹), we cannot, nowadays, avoid the suggestions that a “happy mother = happy child”⁶² and that we must have our “own lives”. Yes, parents are people, too — we all have loves and interests to explore which have nothing to do with our children. However, the biggest lie, which so many commentators, politicians and policymakers have perpetuated, is that value, self-worth and fulfilment for women can *only* come from paid employment outside the home,⁶³ even when their children are young. The message sent and received is that to be raising one's children is *not* to be living one's life, as though the two are discrete, separable and antagonistic. This has fed into another message: that only work performed in exchange for money is worthy of recognition as ‘work’ and that it is practically every mother's duty to ‘get out to work’. Both of these messages are absolutely wrong. Both contribute to perpetrating unfairness, inequality and vulnerability in mothers. Yet feminism, the liberal and corporate varieties especially, is failing to see this injustice or, if it does, is resisting it. Because mothers are, even in feminism, bottom of the heap, less important than the bottom line.

It is also important to note at the outset that when I talk about life-creating power, biology and difference, I am not saying that one type of human being is *better*. It is not a matter of supremacy or dominion over another. That is the whole problem of patriarchal culture: its preoccupation with dichotomy, domination and destruction.⁶⁴ I'm talking about *humanity*: respect for difference, service to others, the cultivation of happiness and wellbeing, and respect for life rather than destruction of it. We have to begin to prioritise humanity. When I speak of difference, I am also talking about differences between individuals *within* the sexes. We are women and we are mothers, yet, at heart we, like all others, are *human*. And that is where we have to go, in feminism and in our societies. We need to discover humanity and put it at the heart of our society, our relationships and our economies.

I will introduce and advocate a progressive, humanist, maternal feminism

and politics which puts the interests of human beings first in policy. We must push for economic and social change, moving away from neoliberal capitalist inequalities and exploitation and environmental destruction. As Julie Stephens argues, “actively remembering the bodily and emotional aspects of nurture, including the physical demands of birth, lactation and the postnatal experience, will pave the way for more just social policies for women and families”.⁶⁵ It is this need for appropriate social policies for mothers and children, extending throughout the family life cycle, which lies at the heart of the Purplestockings Movement.

This feminism and politics must value mothers, the life-givers, the creators of human beings, in the unwaged work of family that they have done for generations, while recognising the changing family life cycle and a mother's individual humanity. It must push for a society in which women are liberated from barriers to full participation in society on our own terms and status as worthy human beings. We face more than “economic exploitation”⁶⁶ — our challenge extends to our politics, our society, and our culture.

In this book, I dare to suggest that we could begin to restructure our societies and reevaluate our priorities. We could insist that fathers contribute more to family life, whilst demanding that market-work frees up more time to family life too by restricting how much of our lives are taken over by the machine of economic workplace productivity and exploitation. Joan Williams has some very interesting points to make in *Unbending Gender, How Work and Family Conflict and What to Do About It*. She advocates a “reconstructive feminism” which doesn't try to fit mothers into a system that is predicated on “ideal workers” (read: men with no caring responsibilities and an abundance of overtime capacity and dedication to the job). Rather, a reconstructive feminism would seek changes to the structure of market-work. Because the fact is that the modern set-up in Western economies requires mothers work as though without family responsibility (or are penalised for having caring responsibilities which are presumed to be solely theirs) and that mothers face tremendous strain doing it all, never mind having it all; or mothers are expected to care for their families without financial support or recognition. And when something goes awry, we get the blame.

As things stand in Western capitalist patriarchy, mothers are held accountable on the one hand yet ignored and devalued on the other. Our work as mothers is deemed unimportant and delegable to the market;

yet it is elevated to the crucible in which our children's happiness and wellbeing are forged. We are in a double bind. We are hostage to unrealistic expectations; to a punitive economy; to unattainable standards; tied to the modern stake of moral judgement or, worse, decisions of (mostly secretive) family courts which are failing to do justice by women.⁶⁷

So we need to demand it ourselves. Not quietly. Or politely. But loudly and with grit. We are mothers. We have it in us.

I have felt frustration, hopelessness, resignation, powerlessness and anger about the situation that mothers face. I know that many women share these feelings: ordinary mothers at home or in jobs they resent, not just campaigners and activists. But then, as mothers, our feelings rarely get top priority, do they? The question is: how can we harness this anger and this need for change with the positive traits of motherhood? How might this spark a storm? This is the aim of *Liberating Motherhood*. We need to put on those purple stockings and release our thunder.

THE PURPLESTOCKINGS SONGSHEET

That said, it's not enough for me to talk about what is wrong with the system. We have to have some concrete ideas about what would *improve* the lives of women who are mothers, and, indeed, society as a whole. And these need to be ideas which go beyond 'universal childcare'. However, I don't like the word 'manifesto'. It's either reminiscent of a Communist one or a political pledge that is used to court votes but is bound to be broken. But I do like a sing-song. And I know that I am singing from the same songsheet as many mothers out there. I hope we can start to join our voices and raise the roof. As bell hooks writes, mothering is "significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists. It should receive recognition, praise, and celebration within a feminist context where there is a renewed effort to rethink the nature of motherhood; to make motherhood neither a compulsory experience for women nor an exploitative or oppressive one; to make female parenting good, effective parenting, whether it is done exclusively by women or in conjunction with men".⁶⁸ Simple. So, sisters, what are we for?

Value and Respect

Mothers to be valued in the work they do and the contribution they make to society. This requires an end to the suggestion that women do nothing productive when they look after their children and bring no skills back to the workplace after caring for their family. We must respect the lived experience of mothers.

A reassessment of what is valuable in our society: life creation, life giving, care and nurture should receive the respect they deserve.

Society and Services

If mothers were valued, our society would invest in public services and community projects to support families and neighbourhoods on the ground, including investment in maternity services and skilled breastfeeding support as a basic right. We would recognise that mothers require care *themselves* in order to care for others without strain.

We cannot continue with the expectation that all adults must work to the bone outside the home, being exploited by capital, with little time for living and leisure or family and love. Our workplaces must reflect the humanity of our citizens: neither men nor women need choose *between* care and paid work; families must be free to organise the care of their children in the way which suits their preferences — whether shared, full-time, part-time or exclusive childcare. We must pursue workforce structures which respect our needs.

Given that, for mothers and fathers at home, our communities and societies are our office, we need to invest in community and social structures which *enrich* our office, for our benefit and for the benefit of those we care for. Libraries, community centres, communal areas such as parks and the countryside, must all benefit from investment and preservation.

Economics

We cannot and must not tolerate financial sacrifice and greater risk of poverty in women because they raised their family for the benefit of society. The answer to the ‘mother question’ and the ‘feminisation of poverty’ cannot in all conscience continue to be “get her earning a pittance outside the home when she would prefer to be with her children”.

Mothers must be supported socially and economically to mother their children and do the work of the home if that is what they wish to do.

We would push for fair tax policies (including transferrable tax

allowances) and welfare policies that adequately reflect the care-work performed in the home. Mothers must be supported to exclusively care, delegate care, or share care *and* participate in the workplace on *their* terms.

Mothers to have money in their pockets. A universal basic income or a living wage for carers to provide economic autonomy and security to women who care for their families exclusively or predominantly. Exploring creative financial ways to reflect the important work done by mothers to support the family and to reduce their financial and personal vulnerabilities within relationships.

Radical, right?

Well, that'll be the Purplestockings for you. 999 Denier. Our song is about love; it's about mothers; it's about life; it's about time.

In our conversations during the writing of this book, Antonella Gambotto-Burke, the author of *Mama: Love, Motherhood and Revolution*, said to me that the cultural shift in our societies from matriarchal to masculine had been:

... based on fear: fear of sensitivity, fear of what men identify as 'weakness' (vulnerability to the feminine), fear of mutability, fear of chaos, fear of intimacy. Female high-achievers are now expected to not only distance themselves from their children, but are regarded as unserious if they do not. We are expected to express disdain for mothering and, concomitantly, for the tenderness and devotion that mothering entails.

As television pundit Katie Hopkins wrote in 2014, "Full-time mummy is not an occupation. It is merely a biological status". Her use of the word 'merely' is interesting: she prides herself on her aggressive self-interest and intolerance. If you can't be loved, be feared, right? Far from subscribing to that antiquated ideal, we need to triumph in our tenderness and sensitivity. As a culture, we need to recognise that devotion to our children does not entail weakness — the very opposite, in fact. Love is the greatest power on this earth. Parenthood and everything it entails needs to be recognised and celebrated for what it is: a revolution.

I couldn't agree with her more. In her book, Antonella calls for a Revolution. I'm with her; put on your purple stockings and join us.

mother-work. The idea of class struggle has given way to individualism: sisterhood has become personhood. And personhood is free to embrace a selfhood which is detached from bodily reality as well as the bonds of love,

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ANESSA OLORENSHAW is a mother of two, activist, breastfeeding counsellor, and former barrister, law reporter and trade union rep from the South East of England. Always intellectually curious and raised — unwittingly, she suspects — to be a feminist within her leftie working-class family.



A revolutionary type of spirit, she has spoken at conferences about maternal feminism, motherhood and the socio-economic situation in which women are expected to raise their families in twenty-first century Western culture.

In March 2015, she published *The Politics of Mothering*, a pamphlet for the UK General Election. She was a founding member-cum-agitator of the Women's Equality Party UK and contributed to policy development on parenting.

Vanessa adores being with her children (they're brilliant, you know) and her husband (she is married to a pretty decent bloke). She balances her hippie tendencies with black outfits and Doc Martens.

She tweets at @VOlorenshaw.

<https://politicsofmothering.wordpress.com/>

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#MothersOfTheWorldUnite

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**Dean Ornish, M.D., President, Preventive Medicine Research
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Moods of Motherhood: the inner journey of mothering by Lucy H. Pearce

Moods of Motherhood charts the inner journey of motherhood, giving voice to the often nebulous, unspoken tumble of emotions that motherhood evokes: tenderness, frustration, joy, grief, anger, depression and love.

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Zoe Foster, JUNO magazine



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